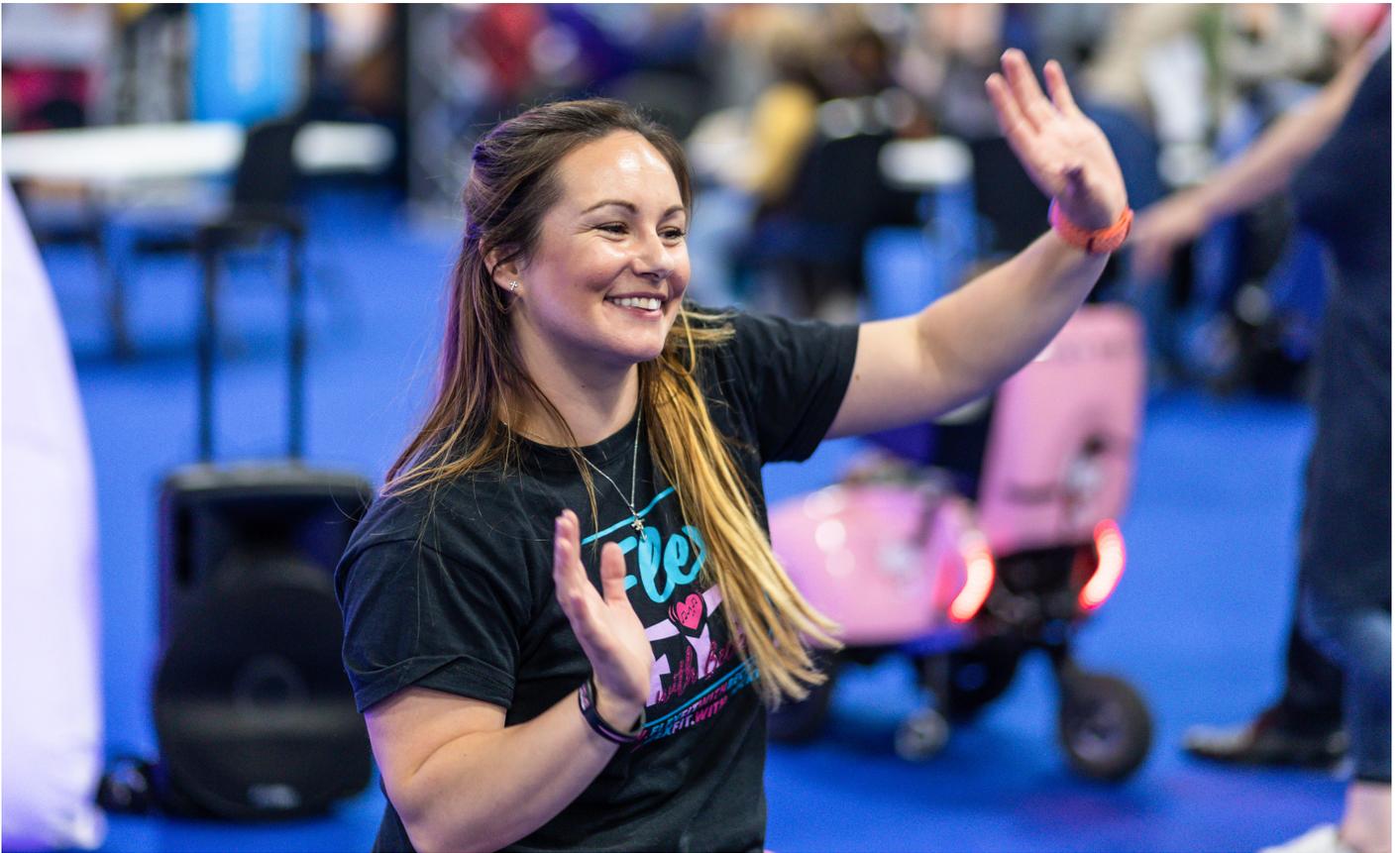


## Wellbeing Writing with Becky Whitaker



We met with dancer, dance teacher and fitness instructor – Becky Whitaker, to ask her all about her approaches to delivery for those with chronic illness, injury and disability. In this Wellbeing Writing, we explore Becky's passion to reduce barriers to participation via her *FlexFit* resources and services.

### **WHAT, TO YOU, IS INCLUSIVE DANCE AND ADAPTIVE FITNESS?**

Inclusive dance and adaptive fitness gives people the ability to partake in a way that works for them. It's important to have opportunities to attend classes and to feel like you belong and are welcome there.

### **HOW DID YOU COME TO DEVELOP FLEXFIT WITH BECKY?**

I've coached sports and taught PE/Dance since 2006. I enjoyed sharing workouts for people to do in lockdown, which then developed into personal training. Around two years later, following some health issues, I changed my business to deliver adaptive fitness and inclusive dance; I want to empower more people to enjoy dance and fitness in whatever way works best for them.

When I became chronically ill in 2020, I searched for inclusive dance classes and couldn't find anything to suit me; I wanted to feel challenged and feel proud of what I was achieving,

but I felt like there weren't the right opportunities for me. I still wanted to learn complex choreography and to experience pace and challenge, but because I wanted a seated class this didn't seem to be an option.

I started teaching inclusive dance to widen opportunities for people with chronic illness or disability. *I want people to recognise that you can still have a good workout and feel confident as a dancer – sitting down shouldn't change that.*

I offer options throughout my classes, to adjust the movements as necessary and I offer challenge options for those who want them. I think it's important to have inclusive opportunities at a variety of levels, so there's opportunity to be challenged as much as suits you. In mainstream dance there's loads of styles and ability levels so you can find something that fits, whereas this is often not the case with inclusive dance.

## **HOW DOES EHLERS DANLOS SYNDROME (EDS) AFFECT YOU AS A DANCER, AND WHAT WOULD BE USEFUL FOR OTHERS TO KNOW ABOUT EDS?**

EDS causes pain and frequent subluxations (partial dislocation) of multiple joints – for me, this mostly affects my lower body but it's different for everyone. There's a lot of associated symptoms that really affect me, such as dizziness, gastro symptoms, chronic fatigue, sickness, nausea, difficulty sleeping, and many others. I think it's hard for people to understand how much EDS actually affects people because most of the symptoms aren't visible. I tried to push through this for a while, but I'd end up sitting out of half a class and then being ill for days after (dysautonomia, pain, sickness, etc).

I now attend mainstream dance classes in my wheelchair and adapt as I go. Yes, I still have to pace myself, but dance is such a huge part of me, it's just the BEST feeling to be back! With EDS it's important to strengthen your muscles, to support your joints, but it's key to do this in the right way so it doesn't have a negative impact.

Learning how to pace myself and manage other parts of my life so I still have energy to do the things I enjoy and need to do has been a turning point for me. It's important to listen to your body and find what works best for you.

*EDS is common in dancers, and I'd like others to know that having EDS or any other illness/injury doesn't have to stop you dancing, you might just need to do it in a different way. I hope to show other dancers that adapted dance can still be fun, enjoyable and challenging!*

## **THINKING ABOUT YOUR PASSION TO REDUCE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION, WHAT ADVICE MIGHT YOU HAVE FOR DANCERS AND DANCE FACILITATORS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN ATTENDING/TEACHING DANCE CLASSES?**

I would love to see more openness so disabled dancers feel able to attend any class and feel welcomed in the space. I attend an advanced hip hop class and adapt the routines in my wheelchair and this has made such a huge difference to my confidence and helped me feel more like 'me' again. It's a class I used to attend before I became disabled – but when I became ill, I never thought that going back would be possible, but we made it work...

The teacher gives me the freedom to adapt the dance as I need to, and I feel empowered and included in the group.

Personally, I like that there's no additional attention drawn to me and it's never assumed that I won't be able to do something. I'm given just as much chance as anyone else – however, this might be different for others, therefore, I would suggest practitioners speak to their participants, e.g. 'Is there anything I can do to support you in class?'

A few things that helped me return were:

- The space was accessible
- For the first few classes, she sent me a video of the routine earlier, so I had a rough idea of what was coming up
- The dance teacher ensured there was space for me in the class – dancing in a wheelchair amongst able-bodied dancers means that my floor patterns are sometimes different (especially if turning or moving sideways), so knowing there's space is really reassuring.

To disabled dancers thinking of attending classes, give it a go, have a great time and prove what you can do! If you want to practice adapting things first, try some classes on YouTube and experiment with what works for you. If you're looking for inclusive dance classes, I have some [tutorials on YouTube](#), and the links are also on my website.

## **WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE BEING MADE IN INCLUSIVE DANCE, AND HOW DO YOU HOPE TO CONTRIBUTE?**

I would love to see more options available in inclusive dance. There needs to be more classes in a variety of styles and targeted at different levels. As an able-bodied dancer, there are so many options available, yet in inclusive dance, there's not as much variety.

A lot of seated/wheelchair dance classes are typically slower-paced or taught at a basic level. This is ideal for many people, but it still leaves a lot of people left out with nothing that suits them.

*I hope to fill the gap in the middle so that there's less disparity between inclusive and mainstream dance.*

I aspire to increase the options available to disabled dancers. My classes offer opportunities for people who need to dance seated but still want to learn new choreography, feel empowered and get that sense of accomplishment. I offer challenges for those who want them and options throughout so participants can make it work best for them.

I want to raise awareness that there are options out there for people and that having a disability, chronic illness, or injury doesn't have to mean the end of dancing. I would love to build class numbers enough to teach different levels and styles. My dream goal would be to create a wheelchair dance performance group and then deliver workshops.

## **DO YOU HAVE ANY PROJECTS OR WORK IN THE PIPELINE THAT OUR READERS MIGHT BE INTERESTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT?**

I've just showcased at my first disability event and hope to do more soon. It was a fantastic experience and a great way of networking with people. I really want to make a difference in

schools, particularly primary schools, so that all children are more included in PE and Dance lessons.

I have created a video-led scheme of work that offers a split screen, showing a standing version and a seated version for all the activities and routines.

I'm also working with international schools to increase opportunities in dance. I plan to offer a CPD course for teachers to gain confidence in adapting PE lessons to make them more inclusive for all pupils.

You can see more of my work online: [www.flexfitwithbecky.com](http://www.flexfitwithbecky.com)

I am teaching dance at the [National Junior Games 2023](#) and am running a dance session in July. There are a lot of exciting things in the pipeline, and I'm really looking forward to being able to offer dance to more people.

Keep a look out for my live classes too – I post class updates on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube: @FlexFit.with.Becky

